FRANCIS BACON:

The Photographic Image, Motion, and a Mode of Vision

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BARBARA SHEFCHIK

Many artists have made use of the photograph since its invention early in the nineteenth century. Francis Bacon, an English painter, born in Dublin in 1910, has relied in various ways upon the photograph since the late 1940's. How he has used the photograph has varied, but consistently, his work materializes from photographic sources, through traditional _belle-peinture_ techniques. Whether or not they refer overtly to specific photo-images, his pictures build upon paradoxes. They combine static and kinetic aspects, emotional and intellectual approaches. In this combination is a continuous struggle between opposed points of view, a choice which seems deliberate and full of significance. Bacon underlined this passage, written by Michel Leiris:

> Beauty must have within it an element that plays the motor role of the first sin. What constitutes beauty is not the confrontation of opposites but the mutual antagonism of those opposites, and the active and vigorous manner in which they invade one another and emerge from the conflict marked as if by a wound or a depradation.[1]

The thought originally came from Beaudelaire, of whom Leiris writes, "For Beaudelaire, beauty cannot come into being without the intervention of something accidental .... which drags the beautiful clear from its glacial stagnation."[2] Francis Bacon's painting concerns itself always with the antagonism of opposites.

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[1]Michel Leiris, "What Francis Bacon's Paintings Say to Me"; in the catalogue, _Francis Bacon, Recent Paintings_, March-April, 1967, p. 17.

[2]John Russell, _Francis Bacon_, p. 142.

His pictures walk a tightrope between monumentality and dissolution, between the appearance of order, and sheer abandon. Motion is the element of intervention, the "something accidental", which is present in the paintings, which when considered with other aspects, makes it seem likely that Bacon's work can be approached as an investigation of the visual process. To this end, Bacon uses motion and the photographic image to present the viewer with a mode of vision.

Bacon's paintings have always been figurative; except for a few landscapes from the fifties, he has never excluded the figure. There is a very strong interest in abstract work in the simply divided backgrounds, often uninflected, but because of the presence of a figure, nearly always in a room, the paintings are never abstract in their entirety. For this reason, the pictures have a tendency towards illustration.

Because the very term "illustration" has a number of different interpretations, it can be and is used to criticize. Bacon is well aware of the problem, and attempts to avoid such condemnation both in verbalising about the paintings and in the paintings themselves. By relying first upon the photograph for imagery, and then by so thoroughly altering the thus-derived subject matter, he is beginning assertively with a pat illustration, and is moving quite far from that by the very ambiguous result of the freely applied paint.

For Bacon, there is in this method a more poignant revelation of fact, something rather different than illustration. He is not interested, he says, in painting the implications of a fact, but simply the fact itself. As he said of his series of paintings concerned with gaping

mouths, "I wanted to paint the scream more than the horror."[3]

Bacon has a clear idea of what distinguishes his work from illustration, which begins with the premise that illustration and fact are not the same things, and that by giving a fact in an ambiguous, non-illustrational way, it is all the more factual. If this sounds complicated, consider Monet's Water Lilies: They are, in a sensuous way, more like water lilies than a perfect rendering, or a photograph, might be, although exactly why is hard to say. This is not to say that perfect renderings cannot be factual. But Bacon has taken the view that by presenting his visual material his way, through distortion, the fact will come more violently, like the on-the-spot veracity of photo-journalism. He is trying to get that same effect of recording and reporting into paint, and he does it through a kind of motion within the painting. It is his mode of vision, his way of analysing the subjects he chooses.

Bacon's subjects are chosen from an array of photo and life sources. The photo sources are frequently easily identified and begin with a picture named Figure in a Landscape, produced in 1945. (FIG. 1) In it, a figure operates what appears to be a sub-machine gun. According to John Rothenstein, Bacon used a snapshot showing a friend sitting in a chair in Hyde Park. The painting retains from the photograph parts of civilian attire, a lapel, a white cuff, shows a dry-brushed hand, and a knee which evaporates in a series of downward brush strokes. The gun is off to the right, and the landscape suggests itself in patches of grass which look more like spikes and flowers of red with black stems. This early

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[3]Lorenza Trucchi, Francis Bacon, p. 2.

transfiguration of the photographic image begins a long standing Bacon modus operandi; a sense of calamity is produced from a subject with no such mood at all.

Bacon does keep violent photos around his studio. For years a picture of Hitler hung on the wall, along with many images of war and violence, and a lot of medical illustrations and photos of friends. A number of Pope pictures were done from photographs of Pius XII, the Velasquez portrait of Pope Innocent X, and in several instances, a tassel in his studio, and the Eisenstein still of the nurse in Potemkin. Pope with a Fan Canopy (FIG. 2) probably comes from a photo of Pius XII being carried in his sedia gestatoria, in which white peacock feathers form the canopy. The Popes were attempted for several years, although today Bacon feels it was a "silly" idea, and that Velasquez carried it as far as it could go. For several years he kept a gory still from Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin. A nurse has just been shot through her eyeglasses: her expression is one of shock and horror. Bacon refers to this image directly in at least four pictures. They all are concerned with gaping, screaming, and grimacing mouths.

But it is not the effect of horror that he is after, he asserts. He is simply after the fact; he is a non-participant, a voyeur. Bacon stated "I like, you may say, the glitter and colour that comes from the mouth and I've always hoped in a sense to be able to paint the mouth like Monet painted a sunset."[4] He painted over a dozen pictures concerned with the open mouth, several referring directly to the Potemkin still,

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[4]David Sylvester, p. 50.

and others relying upon a book of diseases of the mouth, which he purchased in Paris as a youth. It was his ambition to "make the best painting of the human cry",[5].... although now he feels he failed at it.

Of the Muybridge photographs used by Bacon, one particular study of men wrestling becomes central to at least eight of Bacon's paintings. There are at least four based upon the Muybridge study of a man lifting a boulder, two from a photo of a paralytic child, two from a bullmastiff, one of a man diving, and some apes or monkeys.

One other source of photographic material drawn upon by Bacon is a book on X-ray photography. Its usefulness is most obvious in the work of the last fifteen years, especially in portraits. It is a book called Positioning in Radiography, with photographs showing X-rays, and the positioning of the body for X-rays. The images have been assimilated and are quite transformed in his work. The only painting which the subject is the same as the photo upon which it is based is the Study for the Nurse in the Battleship Potemkin. (FIG. 3 and 4) While the postures of many figures come specifically from Muybridge studies, they are given a thoroughly different aspect. Bacon said of his use of the photograph,

> I think of myself as a kind of pulverizing machine into which everything I look at and feel is fed. I believe that I am different from the mixed-media jackdaws who use photographs more or less literally or cut them up and rearrange them. The literalness of photographs so used - even if they are only fragments--will prevent the emergence of real images, because the literalness of the appearance has not been sufficiently digested and transformed. In my case the photographs become a sort of compost out of which images emerge from time to time. Those images may be partly conditioned by the mood of the material which has gone into the pulverizer.[6]

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[5]Ibid., p. 50.

[6]Ibid., p. 56.

During the fifties his attempts to paint the fact of the human cry gave way to study of outwardly less convulsive images. Bacon began to investigate the possibilities of motion, and in these pictures he relied heavily upon the photographic record left by Eadweard Muybridge. In the late nineteenth century Eadweard Muybridge developed a system for stop-action photography. He did exhaustive studies of the horse, the dog, man, other mammuals and birds. His work led directly to the motion picture, and also served to inform painters of the late nineteenth century on the actual positions of animals and men in locomotion. Long before Bacon availed himself of these useful records, Degas, according to Aaron Scharf, made use of photographic images to better his understanding. Some of the ballet pictures derive from known photographs. The discovery generally made by the end of the nineteenth century, by Degas and many other painters, was that the figure in motion, no matter how correctly represented, appeared to be only "on the verge" unless the paint was blurred in the moving image. For example, Gestalt psychologists "discuss the experience of expanding and rotating form and of broken or blurred peripheral contours as important factors in inducing a psychological sensation of movement."[7]

Francis Bacon's interest in movement probably began before he used any Muybridge images. There is, for instance, an implication of velocity in the Figure in Landscape of 1945. The actual study of figures in motion per se begins with Study from the Human Body, 1949. It is probably Bacon's first transfiguration of a Muybridge photograph, and it was taken from a

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[7] Aaron Scharf, "Painting, Photography, and the Image of Movement", Burlington Magazine, (May, 1962) p. 186.

series of photos of men wrestling. In 1951, Bacon produced Study for a Nude, from a photograph of a man lifting a boulder, part of Muybridge's studies on human locomotion. The measuring grid found in the background of the Muybridge studies is suggested by vertical lines in the Bacon picture. During the early fifties, Bacon also worked from Muybridge studies of a bullmastiff walking, of monkeys, apes, rhinoceros, and a paralytic child on all fours. There is in these images a persistent blurring and dry-brushing transparency which gives an effect of a fleeting vision. One sees the paintings, and feels they are seen while quickly turning past them, or out of the corner of the eye. (FIG. 5, 6, 7, 8).

In all of these there is a conscious avoidance of static monumental forms, and from 1953, the use of the wrestlers documents takes a significant turn. Two Figures 1953, although visibly derived from the Muybridge studies, conjures up instead, an image at the strainings of homosexual erotic coupling. During the fifties, Bacon also worked out numerous pictures using images of Popes, in which he avoided a static and monumental effect despite the inherent bulkiness in the appearance of a fully vested Pope. The Pope images convey the sense of calamity so familiar in Bacon's work through gestures which they perform. In the attempt to combine the static image of Pope, so fraught with connotations of eternity and outdatedness, with a sense of immediacy, Bacon has made a paradox of the inviolate Pope with his public persona deteriorating before the viewers eye.

There is, then, always an effect of movement against a static background in Bacon's images. This part of Bacon's work has received little attention because of the unique place he holds as a figurative painter. Most of the writers on Bacon concern themselves with whether or not his work is horrific, and if so, how much, with whether or not it is relevant, and with whether or not it is illustration. The critics discuss the relationship of the work with photography, but only go so far as to mention the presence of an impression of movement. For the most part, the writers on Bacon attempt to justify or condemn him in terms of what they think ought to be the taste of the times. Infrequently they consider it possible that Bacon is presenting, through this element of motion, a study of the nature of the visual experience, or a mode of vision.

The portraits, especially from the last two years all have the same effect of blurring which occurs in photography where the subject moves and the shutter speed is too slow to stop it. None of the figures ever seem to be totally at rest. As Lawrence Alloway suggested, "Some Bacon pictures seem planned as successive episodes in one action .... The body though solid and continuous, is often crumpled and folded. Centripetal rather than successive forms result from movement."[8] In other words, Bacon's concern is like that of Myron in producing the Discobolus, to show successive parts of movement in one still image. Bacon gives this effect through dry-brushing and smearing paint more than by using old conventions of painting technique which show the exact position of the figure at a given point in movement. He represents successive parts of motion all at

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[8] Lawrence Alloway, "Dr. No's Bacon", Arts Review, London, April 9, 1960, p. 4.

once, aided by the idiom of photography. As Van Deren Coke wrote,

> Bacon's recent paintings of heads in motion also owe a debt to photographs that record with a slow shutter speed the transparent ghosts of forms. In Bacon's paintings a cheek appears to spread across a face, as if it had been partially caught in motion during exposure to the lens. The effect of motion is understood because of our familiarity with similar photographic distortions. Rarely, however, can the camera convey the emotional impact inherent in such a phenomenon as effectively as does Bacon in his canvasses.[9]

It seems that Coke, and the others interested, might be able to draw a lot more from this aspect of Bacon's paintings. The kinetic quality is always there, as though the ever present journalism of the twentieth century has given Bacon the only possible way to see. Walking past Bacon's paintings is like having a television on without the sound, but with, often, the same violent content. It is as if Bacon has digested the cinematic communications of violence we see daily and has distilled from all that information a highly relevant and characteristic style and mode of vision.

Along with the kinetic quality in Bacon's work, there is often in his later work the skeletal substructure of the figures, so that there is a feeling of both seeing across and seeing through the subject. (FIG. 9) Often this combination results in the impression that the skeleton is turning around inside the skin.

> He not only sees his subject in several attitudes at once, he sees through it as well, the bony substructure and the flesh often oppose each other in a violent tension that is kept barely coherent through the force and articulateness of the paint itself.[10]

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[9]Van Deren Coke, The Painter and the Photograph From Delacroix to Warhol, p. 114.

[10]Henry Geldzahler, "Introduction" in Francis Bacon: Recent Paintings 1968-1974, March 20 to June 29, 1975, Metropolitan Museum, p. 10.

Bacon says over and over again that his concern in painting is how to bring about appearance, without using illustrational technique. It seems after looking and hearing that what Bacon means by appearance is something much more than likeness. He must mean the act of appearing. With the figure always given in motion against a static background, it seems that the figures are always in the act of appearing. Bacon has said:

> Well now, what personally I would like to do would be, for instance, to make portraits which were portraits but came out of things which really had nothing to do with what is called the illustrational facts of the image; they would be made differently, and yet they would give the appearance. To me the mystery of painting today is how appearance can be made .....[11]

Bacon's purpose is to record facts, after the fashion of photojournalists, but he would get to a deeper level of fact, one which can only be communicated by paint, not by the photograph, he contends. Bacon himself does not explain what he means by this deeper level of fact, but he gives it away when he says: "And the way I try to bring appearance about makes one question all the time what appearance is at all."[12] (FIG. 10)

This must be a statement to the effect that Bacon is meditating upon the nature of the visual experience in a very specific way. How does appearance come about?

> Still more, the kinetic blur and slip is the movement of perception, the actual visual act. The eye grasps, slides on, and grasps again: the form is hollowed and stretched by the movement .... Under the surface there is a recurrent meditation on the nature of an image. For all the substance of the paint, the resemblance is as fugitive as a reflection .... It looks more and more as if everything in Bacon's pictures is the outcome of a single concern the intrinsic quality of the figurative event.[13]

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[11] Sylvester, Interviews With Francis Bacon, p. 105.

[12] Ibid., p. 118.

[13] Lawrence Gowing, "Pigment Figment", Art News, December, 1969, p. 43.

During the past fifteen years Bacon has devoted more time to painting in series, to pictures intended to be seen in groups of three, sometimes four, five, and six. He uses nearly the same dimensions for the larger triptychs and the small paintings usually are just large enough to accommodate life-size heads. It is the heads which come in fours, fives, and sixes. Bacon says the series idea may have come from looking at all the Muybridge pictures showing stages of movement. There are, as well, all the religious paintings produced in series to be seen together. Bacon's serial paintings refer in several directions--to the medieval and Rennaissance alterpieces that close at certain times of the year, where the side panels amplify the narrative stated most boldly in the center, and to still photography and film, where the same scene is viewed a moment later, or in a different psychological light.[14] The choice of serial painting also allows Bacon to paint several figures, and yet restrain the narrative tendency of grouped figures by confining individuals to separate panels. The confinement itself is part of a European tradition of painting figures in rooms, which began in the Gothic period, the rooms being fitted out according to the meaning intended. (FIG. 11)

When asked why he has become interested in working with series, Bacon replied in no uncertain terms that it has to do with how he sees:

> Partly because I see every image all the time in a shifting way and almost in shifting sequences. So that one can take it from more or less what is called ordinary figuration to a very, very, far point .... I'd really, I'd like to paint rooms of pictures with different subject matter but treated serially. I see rooms full of paintings; they just fall in like slides.[15]

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[14] Geldzahler, "Introduction" in Francis Bacon Recent Paintings, 1968-1974, p. 12-13.

[15] Sylvester, Interviews with Francis Bacon, p. 21.

Bacon frequently states that his paintings deal with the transitory nature of the visual experience. The thought of illustration repels him, yet there is a strong narrative quality coming through in numerous later paintings. The paintings of George Dyer's death (FIG. 13) give an undeniable impression of sequence. The element of time has entered and taken a prominent role. While the earlier paintings were either in fact single, or could be considered separately, the later series are interdependent and involve time. While the earlier pictures deal with the blurred image of a single figure, later paintings propose complex and varied impressions of the subject through time. Always there is an aversion to the static.

Monumentality may never be found in Bacon's work, but since 1964 when he painted three studies for a Portrait of Lucien Freud, (FIG. 12) there has been an increasing massiveness to his figures. As Trucchi states, "The troubled figures--the human flotsam consumed by neurosis--remain a part of Bacon's gallery, but they now have a less embryonic, more human appearance that at times becomes positively plastic."[16] Since 1960 Bacon has "been aiming to tauten his human images by making them more factually like and less generally reminiscential."[17]

How to accomplish that remains a problem. Bacon has developed an ever starker background against which he places more and more plastic figures, yet within those configurations there is a torsion which unfailingly evokes a sensation of movement. While going towards more sculptural figures, the kinetic quality produced by painterly techniques

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[16]Trucchi, Francis Bacon, p. 13-14.

[17]Russell, Francis Bacon, p. 164.

is retained. There is a paradoxical combination of sculptural form which comes very close to monumentality, and painterly techniques, which diverts the monumental tendencies and gives a sense of motion. (FIG. 13)

The roots of this paradox lie in Bacon's first overt references to the study of motion. The way he worked with the Muybridge studies points toward this later development. Consider the difference between the Bacon-Muybridge relationship, and the interest Duchamp showed in the photographs of Marey. Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase (1912) is a visual record of a kinetic event, something Aaron Schaarf called a "stroboscopic passage down the stairs." Duchamp probably relied on Marey for correctness in this picture, Marey having experimented with photographs to graph movement.

> Marey, in some cases, opened the shutter of his camera long enough to allow a point of light on a locomotive figure against a black background to produce a linear image on the plate; one which thus symbolized a path of movement itself.[18]

Duchamp borrowed this linear image directly and produced a record of the passage of a moving subject.

The difference between what intrigued Duchamp with Marey's work and Bacon's interest in Muybridge is both in degree and kind. Bacon so transfigures the Muybridge studies in mood and connotation that his interest appears to be less scientific by far than Duchamp's. Bacon's interest is more in the deformations of photographic images than in their scientific values. He represents the peculiarity of appearance rather than graphing movement. Where Duchamp's work charts the passage of a moving figure,

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[18]Schaarf, "Painting, Photography, and the Image of Movement", p. 192.

Bacon's delays it so that the pictures are records of change itself, not of movement's progress. Bacon's work is related as well to other aspects of modern painting. While he must be seen as standing alone, and outside of most of the movements of the past hundred years, there are some important connections with particular artists which throw some light on his work. To begin with, Bacon is occasionally linked to Fuseli and Munch. Munch's The Scream is sometimes cited as the inspiration for Bacon's open-mouthed figures of the fifties. Bacon himself opposes this hypothesis. For one thing, he contends, he is not trying to do the same thing as Munch. He is not concerned with saying something about the nature of man as Munch was. He said that he was probably more involved in the "aesthetic side of painting" than Munch, and that he hardly knows what half of his own paintings might mean. As for the connection with Fuseli, Bacon's non-moralistic attitudes deny any similarities.[19]

This attitude of Bacon's is a kind of voyeurism, a kind of reporter's factuality that has no concern for the potential offensiveness of subject matter. There is, in fact, no acknowledgement of the viewer. Degas really did the same thing, taking odd view points which he learned to see from the Japanese woodblock print and from the camera. One has the feeling of looking in on something private with the Degas pictures. With Bacon the same is true, but what the unacknowledged viewer might see is likely to be far more private.

Bacon's relationship to the Cubists is discussed frequently, but the

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[19] Sylvester, Interviews with Francis Bacon, p. 82.

nature of that relationship depends upon which theory of Cubist aesthetics one embraces. For example, Guillaume Apollinaire considered that the Cubists were reflecting their insight into permanent realities, or essences. He said that through harmony they made visible this insight, which resulted in beauty, the first goal of painting.

According to Christopher Gray, the reality understood by the Cubists was "change itself", and the role of the artist was to "attempt to control and reflect the universal dynamism of life and change."[20] If this is the concept of Cubism, then the connection with Bacon may be very strong. There is little to disagree with in Apollonaire's assessment applied to Bacon either if one can think what the "permanent realities" or essences might be, and if one finds beauty to be Bacon's achievement. Perhaps the permanent reality is change, not an uncommon idea in the twentieth century. Kahnweiler's idea diverges, and emphasizes the Cubists' more fundamental interest in "solid bodies."

> In their courageous effort the Cubists returned to the study of solid bodies; it was their profoundest wish to be realistic, and their achievement was to substitute for the "realism" of the nineteenth century the "Realism" of medieval philosophy. Today conceptual painting is not the representation of an object 'perceived', but the plain conception of that object .... we have defined this new spirit as being engendered by the philosophical conceptions of the tangible world as inside man, rather than as part (and this was to be the conception of the previous eight centuries) of the tangible world.[21]

This conception or vision is not of what one sees in one moment, but rather a cumulative knowledge of an object. That knowledge, "ultimately composed in the memory" is a knowledge of the "essence" of a thing,

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[20]Christopher Gray, Cubist Aesthetic Theories, p. 160.

[21]Daniel Henry Kahnweiler, The Life of Juan Gris, p. 133.

apparently.[22] It is a construction through sense experience, a Bergsonian, not an ideational comprehension.

The belief that Bacon's work is related to Cubism is fairly common. John Russell, for example, contends that Bacon may proceed from the same basis as the Cubists, but the images which result are quite different. As he said,

> Picasso pulled the human head about with a freedom and an implied savagery which could hardly be surpassed; but when he put it together there resulted most often a monumentality, a look of inevitability and resolution, which are not a part of Bacon's interest. Picasso's heads could often be reproduced in sheet iron without any real loss .... Bacon's heads by contrast are pure painting and could not be transposed into any other medium: the thing said and the way of saying it interlocks completely.[23]

Perhaps Bacon fulfills his desire to get the image across through the "nervous system", rather than through the intellectual process. This appeal through the nervous system is not unlike the Baroque appeal to the senses, so Lawrence Alloway's characterization might be as apt as any. He called Bacon's work "a Baroque version of Cubist form."[24]

Bacon's work has been linked to that of Giacommetti, as well. The aspects their work have in common have been interpreted to be the "messages" of the work, for there is a tendency for viewers to "weave stories" about both Bacon's and the sculptor's work, as David Sylvester points out. Giacommetti found it "rather crass." Bacon agreed, for the sculptor was "only trying to copy what he saw." In one interview Bacon could have revealed something more about his work, for Sylvester was digging:

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[22]Ibid., p. 72

[23]Russell, Francis Bacon, p. 190.

[24]Alloway, "Dr. No's Bacon", p. 4.

> D. S. On the other hand, he (Giacommetti), wasn't only copying what he saw. He was, for one thing, crystalizing very complex feelings about the act of seeing .... Perhaps you'd tell me what you feel your painting is about besides appearance?
> F. B. It's concerned with my kind of psyche--its concerned with my kind of--I'm putting it in a very pleasant way--exhilerated despair.[25]

Unfortunately, Sylvester did not pursue the question, and one feels that Bacon gave his answer to stay in the game, for the entire ouevre of Bacon seems to be exploring the nature of the visual experience.

At this point it seems logical to ask whether or not this "deeply unlocking of areas of sensation" needs to be figurative. After all, the abstract expressionists may claim the same objective. Bacon has his own opinions about it. He considers painting to be a duality, of "instinctive and accidental things", and of a great desire for order. He feels that abstract painting only operates on one level, that it is "only interested in the beauty of its patterns or shapes."[26] It is either one thing or the other, but not both. Bacon further explained his viewpoint in discussing Rembrandt, the attraction to him reinforcing his defense of figurative painting.

> And abstract expressionism has all been done in Rembrandt's works. But in Rembrandt it has been done with the added thing that it was an attempt to record a fact and to me therefore must be much more exciting and much more profound.[27]

Both from the paintings and in the discussions with Bacon, there arises a conviction that Bacon is one of very few painters who has

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[25] Sylvester, Interviews with Francis Bacon, p. 83.

[26] Sylvester, Interviews with Francis Bacon, p. 58.

[27] Ibid., p. 59.

synthesized two camps of painting. Herbert Read delineated the two camps in his 1936 publication, Art Now, a book which included Bacon among young artists to watch.

> For there are at least two modes of art: the mode of intellectual vision, whose end is absolute beauty; and the mode of emotional expression, whose end is the communication of sympathetic feeling; the mode of Rubens, (but much more typically the mode of Raphael and the Italian masters generally) and the mode of Van Eyck. Today the mode of Picasso or Braque and the mode of Nolde or Rouault.[28]

Criticism of Bacon has often managed to settle him in the mode of emotional expression, finding that it somehow overwhelms the formal and intellectual aspects of his work. Those critics tend to associate him more closely with some long line of grotesquerie, a bit of which cannot be denied. William Feaver, for example, mentions a troop of meat painters, Rembrandt, Goya Grunewald, Soutine, implying that Bacon is somehow guilty for doing something which has already been done. He is, then, also culpable for his crucifixions, especially related by their gore to Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece, but without the hope of redemption. However, the same association with a long tradition of curiousity about the appearance of mortality can also be seen another way. H. H. Arnason points out that "the dignity, the spaciousness, the traditionalism of the concept and its execution throw into relief its disturbing qualities", referring in his statement to the meat carcass in Painting, 1946, but it is equally applicable to the Crucifixions. [29]

Arnason is vaguely pointing to something about Bacon which seems obvious, yet gets very little attention. The paintings do have a sen-

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[28]Herbert Read, Art Now, p. 93.

[29]H. H. Arnason, History of Modern Art, p. 531-532.

sationalism about them, but it is equalled by the intellectual control exercised over them. Faces and bodies contort, twist, and writhe against clearly defined and markedly contained backgrounds, achieving an extraordinary unity of opposed techniques and moods. Bacon describes this unity in an odd way:

> I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of human presence and a memory trace of past events as the snail leaves its slime.[30]

Bacon may be after a "memory trace", but he gets more than that. Russell explains that "what Bacon is after is .... the most direct and poignant of possible statements about the fugitive nature of human beings. What he stalks in his sitters is a certain resonant energy in the organization of their flawed natures." [31]

Somehow it is the nature of paint used his way to communicate that "certain resonant energy", or as Bacon puts it, to "return fact onto the nervous system in a more violent way." Bacon feels that this violent imposition on the viewer is what his paintings ought to have. He has said "when people say my work looks violent .... perhaps I have .... been able to clear away one or two of the veils or screens .... we nearly always live through."[32]

In recent years Bacon's work has become more and more articulate. The figures have grown more plastic, more and more sculptural, yet always

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[30]Sam Hunter, "The Anatomy of Horror", Magazine of Art, Vol. 45, No. 1, Jan. 1952, p. 13.

[31]Russell, Francis Bacon, p. 142.

[32]Ibid., p. 32.

with a malerisch treatment, a surface dry-brushed and still giving the viewer the look of a face in a stocking heap, a body punched, a figure in motion. Bacon concurrently has been saying that the Greeks and the Egyptians created the greatest images man has made. This is certainly supportive of the increasing strength of his recent images. As Norman Canady observed, there is a

> "Classical clarification and sculpture--like force of content evident in Bacon's late paintings ....(they are) .... directed to one's experience of memorable figure formulations within Western culture .... the centre panel figure in triptych March 1974 (comes from) the Discobulus, the epitome of stopped motion in art."[33]

Bacon's interest in motion could not be more obvious, yet there is still a tendency to wring from the paintings stories and philosophic statements more appropriate to the theatre. For example, Lorenzo Trucchi's monograph has in it the following statement:

> "In his ruthless annotation of the reality of death--the lessening of will, the decay of the body defeated in its last battle--the painter reaches, in the indisputable quality of his expressive and formal achievements, a sound classicism .... one that seeks not an aesthetic but an existential goal .... and .... time of the instinct, space of the event, and--since the instinct is embodied in the event--time and space coincide so perfectly as to create one highly concentrated existential situation."[34]

Trucchi insists that Bacon's Classicism is in collaboration with some existential goal. The statement sounds more like a review of Sartre's Huis Clos than a discussion of painting. Bacon, in fact, has stated frequently that he is more interested in human behavior than in art, but does that mean that his pictures are conceived as studies in human

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[33]Norman Canady, "Francis Bacon at the Metropolitan Museum", Burlington Magazine, June 1975, p. 425.

[34]Trucchi, Francis Bacon, p. 3.

behavior, or that they are a misplaced painter's answer to the theatre of the absurd? There is a problem of emphasis about Bacon's work. He is, after all, a painter, and his concerns are probably more visual than philosophic or psychological.

If Bacon is after any sort of "ideas", the quality of elusiveness must be the major clue. The paintings are like "vapours from a magic cauldron, condensing here and there into the wavering likeness of a human form, but about to disintegrate again."[35] Always just hovering there, the human likeness in Bacon's painting conveys a sense of motion, and its larger aspect, time. Perhaps Bacon is by implication involved with notions of time. In that sense, then,there is a concern beyond the painting of images. It is something to do with his convictions about "fact", or truth as he sees it.

Lawrence Alloway made some statements about the paintings which lean in this direction. He wrote:

> In the portraits, ... the complex provocative imagery and the deposit of paint are united .... one needs .... a capacity to experience a form in motion as it becomes an image in time. Time is both the running together of features as the model moves and the skull which the twisting planes of the head conjure up .... (and it is a) paradox of time as living motion and time as death.[36]

Although others have noted the element of time, there are divergent points of view about it. Trucchi said "the time sense involved--appropriate, as shall be seen, to the suddeness of the snapshot .... has no

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[35] John Rothenstein, "Introduction", in the catalogue Francis Bacon, 24 May--1 July, 1962, Tate Gallery, p. 1.

[36] Alloway, "Dr. No's Bacon", p. 4.

reverberations beyond those limited and defined by the event."[37]

Perhaps the problem of finding too much in the content of Bacon's paintings also causes an equal and opposite reaction, of finding less than is there. The truth, or Bacon's "fact", probably lies somewhere between. The notions of "appearance and decay", of motion and the static must be considered central to Bacon's interests. Bacon is always trying to catch an appearance and nail it writhing to the canvas. He literally does just that in some recent paintings, with the nails to prove it. Images of persons and photo and portrait images within the same paintings refer back and forth to the same desire to fix that fleeting element for good, as Bacon said, "and there you have it." Bacon plays a game of chance, in which he keeps an image writhing against an eternal background, "too little defined not to seem resistent to time."[38] The violence of that image is the intervening element through which Leiris has said a presence appears, and through which one glimpses another way of seeing.

Bacon's interest in the photographic image and in motion is part of his exploration of the nature of vision itself, and in the nature of the figurative event. He reveals the characteristics of appearance of subject matter through a kind of transubstantiation, and it is conceivable that Bacon's interest is as much in motion and time as in the formal examination of the seamy side of life.

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[37]Trucchi, Francis Bacon, p. 13.

[38]Leiris, "What Francis Bacon's Paintings Say to Me", p. 19.

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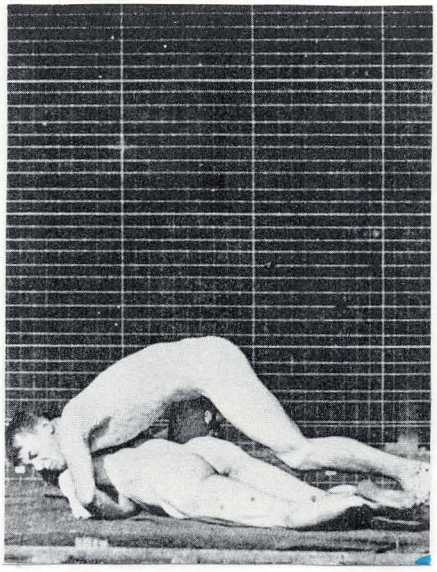


FIG. a. From The Muybridge Studies Of Men Wrestling, 1887

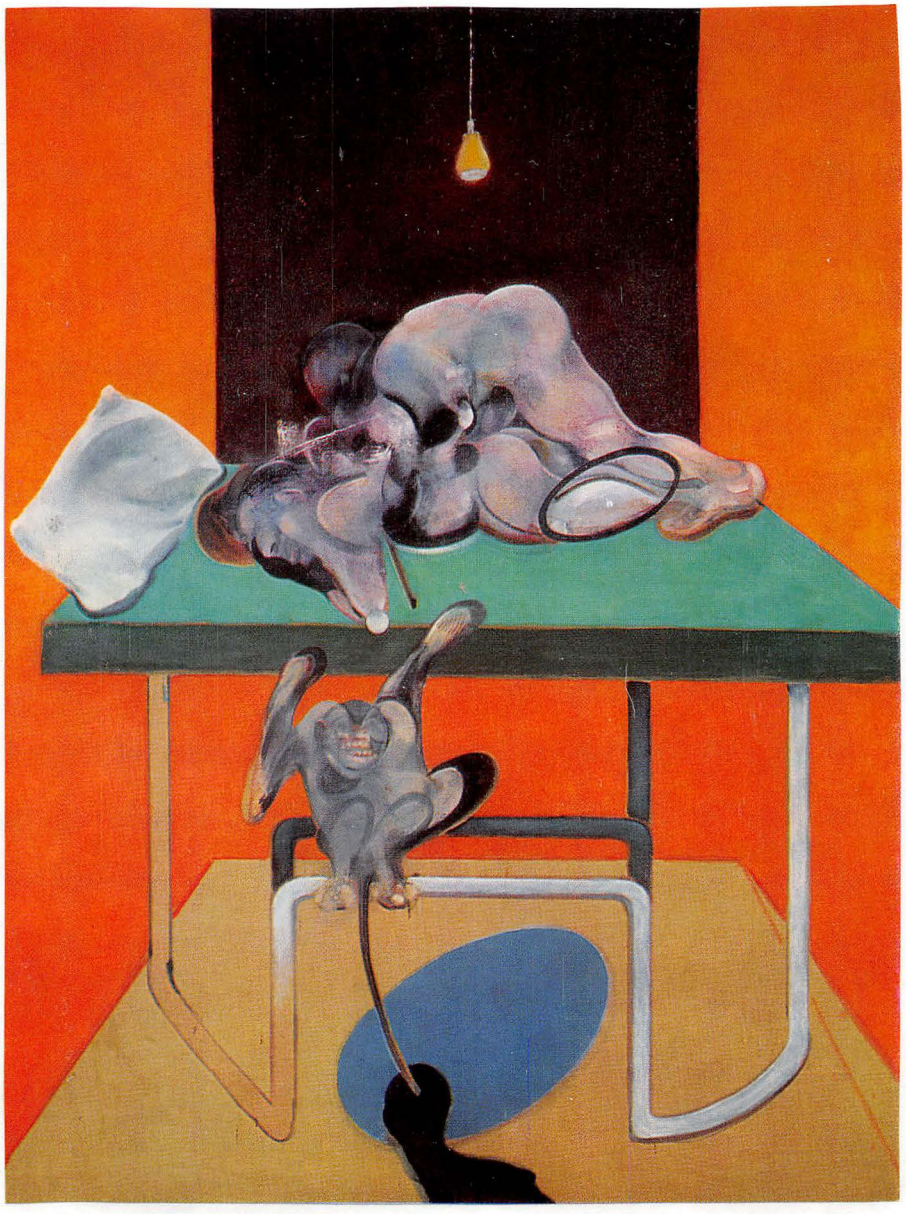


FIG. b. Two Figures With A Monkey , 1973

FIG. 1, Figure In A Landscape, 1945

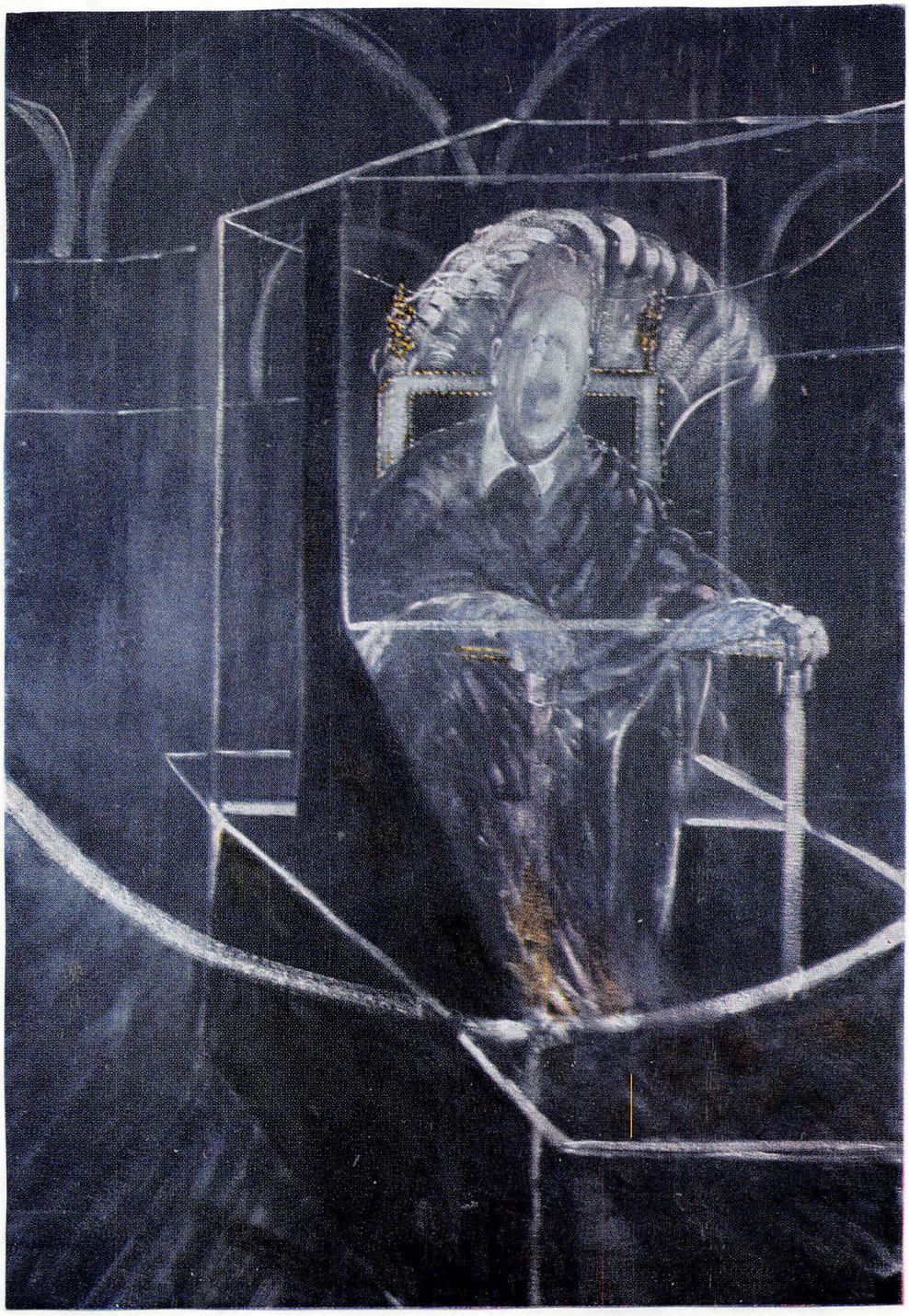


FIG. 2, Pope With A Fan Canopy, 1957

FIG. 3, A Close Up Of The Nurse In The Eisenstein Film, The Battleship Potemkin

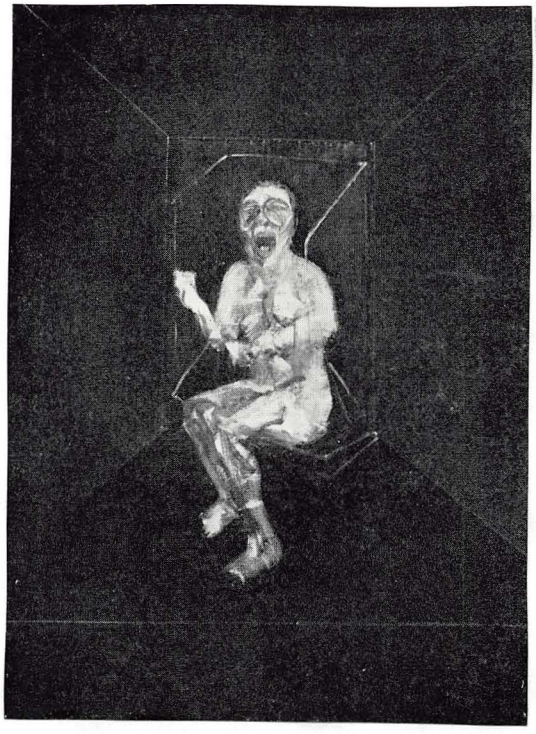
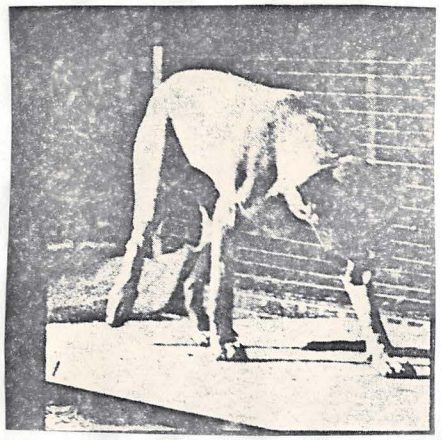


FIG. 4, Study For The Nurse In The Battleship Potemkin



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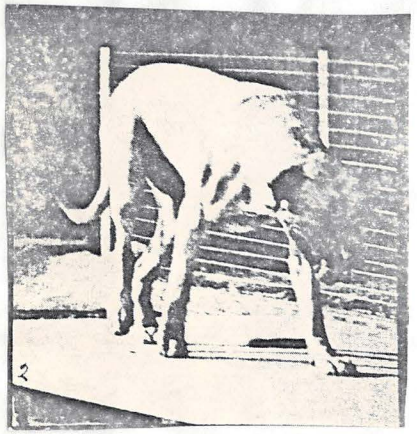

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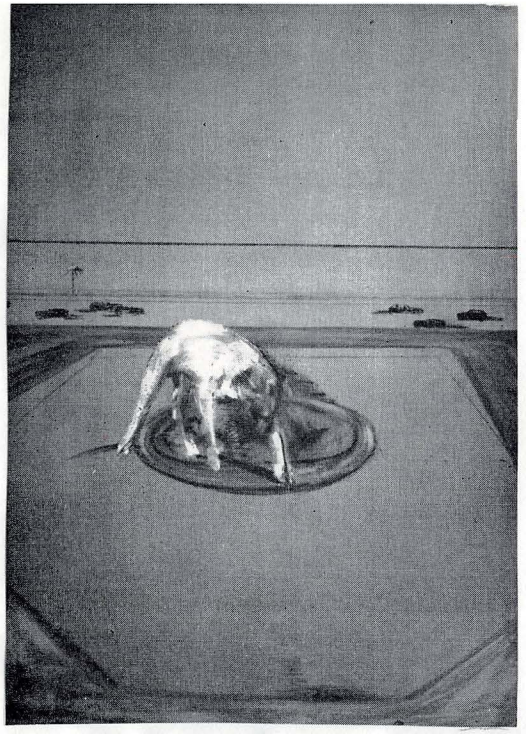

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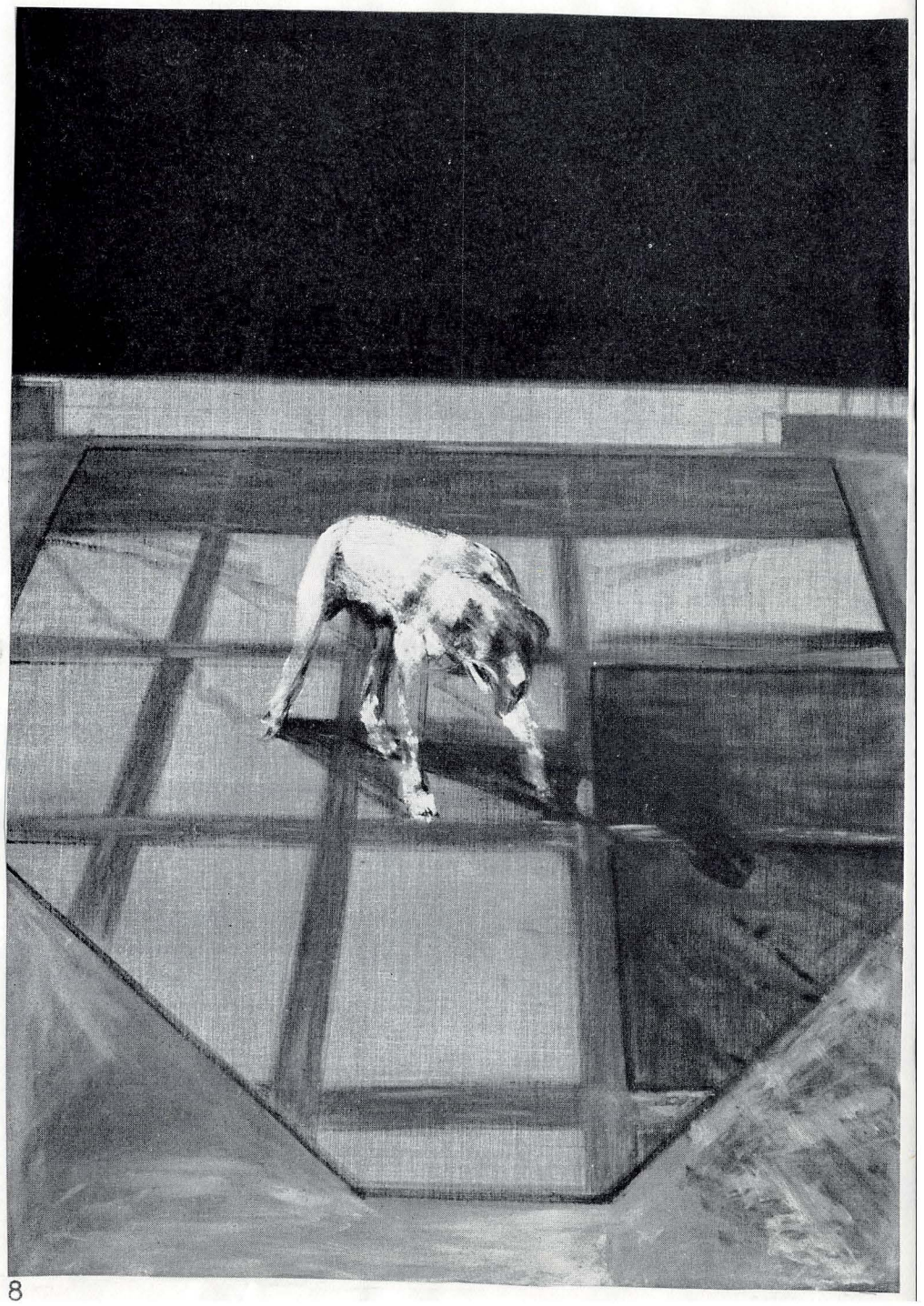

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FIG. 5,6, Studies Of A Bullmastiff Walking

FIG. 7, Study Of A Dog, 1952

FIG. 8, Dog, 1952

FIG. 9, Man With A Dog, 1953

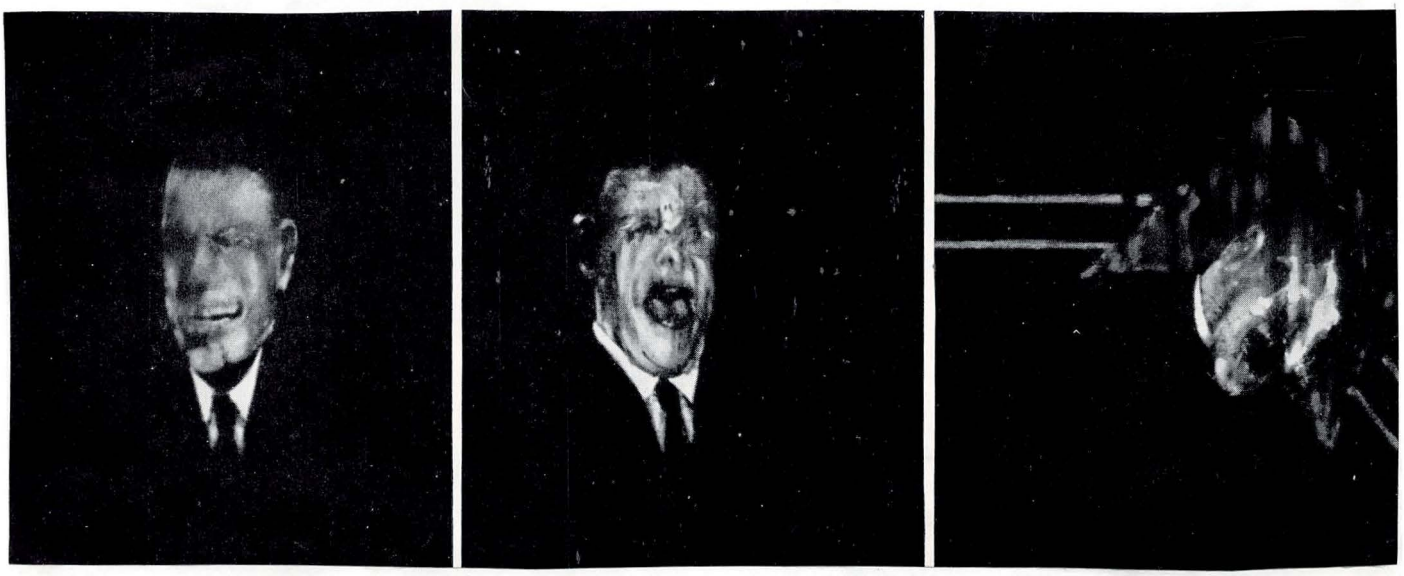

FIG. 10, Three Studies For The Human Head, 1953

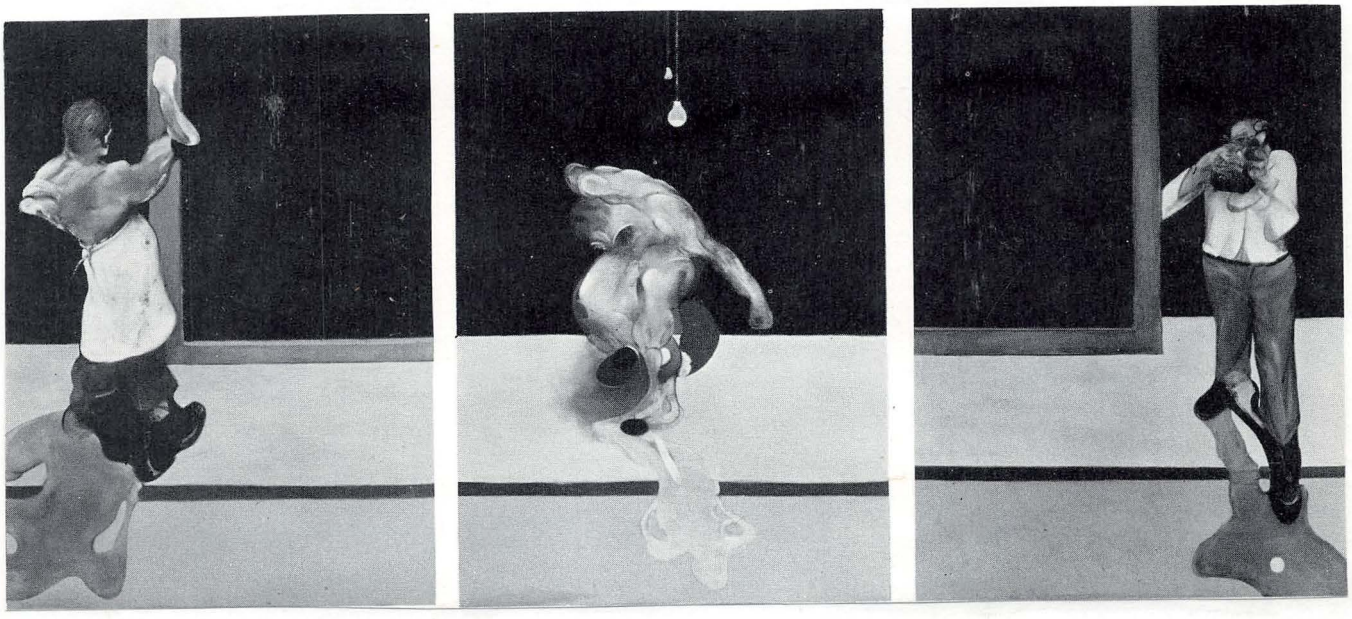

FIG. 11, Triptych, March, 1974

FIG. 12, Three Studies For A Portrait Of Lucien Freud

FIG. 13 Triptych, 1973